Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation

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Martin Luther, one of the most notable theologians in Christian history, is responsible for initiating the Protestant Reformation. To some sixteenth century Christians, he was hailed as a pioneering defender of truth and religious freedoms; to others, he was charged as a heretical leader of a religious revolt.

Today, most Christians would agree that he influenced the shape of Protestant Christianity more than any other person. The Lutheran denomination was named after Martin Luther.

Young Life

Martin Luther was born into Roman Catholicism in the small town of Eisleben, near modern Berlin in Germany. His parents were Hans and Margarethe Luther, middle-class peasant laborers. His father, a miner, worked hard to ensure a proper education for his son, and by age 21, Martin Luther held a Master of Arts degree from the University of Erfurt. Following Hans's dream for his son to become a lawyer, Martin began to study law in 1505. But later that year, while traveling through a terrible thunderstorm, Martin had an experience that would change the course of his future. Fearing for his life when a lightening strike narrowly missed him, Martin cried out a vow to God. If he survived, he promised to live as a monk -- and so he did! To the strong disappointment of his parents, Luther entered the Augustinian Order at Erfurt in less than a month's time, becoming an Augustinian friar.

Some speculate that Luther's decision to pursue a life of religious devotion was not as sudden as history suggests but had been in development for some time, for he entered the monastic life with great fervor. He was driven by fears of hell, God's wrath, and a need to gain the assurance of his own salvation. Even after his ordination in 1507, he was haunted with insecurity over his eternal fate and disillusioned by the immorality and corruption he witnessed among the Catholic

priests he had visited in Rome. In an effort to shift his focus from the spiritual state of his troubled soul, Luther moved to Wittenburg in 1511 to earn his Doctorate of Theology.

The Birth of the Reformation

As Martin Luther immersed himself deeply in the study of Scripture, especially the letters written by the Apostle Paul, Luther came to the overwhelming belief that he was "saved by grace through faith" alone (Ephesians 2:8). When he began to teach as a professor of biblical theology at the University of Wittenburg, his newfound enthusiasm began to spill over into his lectures and discussions with staff and faculty. He spoke passionately about Christ's role as the only mediator between God and man, and that by grace and not through works, are men justified and forgiven of sin. Salvation, Luther now felt with all assurance, was God's free gift. It didn't take long for his radical ideas to get noticed. After this, not only would these revelations change Luther's life, they would forever change the direction of church history.

The 95 Theses

In 1514, Luther began to serve as a priest for Wittenburg's Castle Church, and people flocked to hear God's Word preached like never before. During this time, Luther learned of the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences. The Pope, according to his discretion from the "treasury of merits from the saints," sold religious merits in exchange for funds to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Those who purchased these indulgence documents were promised a reduced punishment for their sins, for the sins of departed loved ones, and in some cases, total forgiveness from all sin. Spurred by the unscrupulous practices of John Tetzel, a monk living in nearby Saxony, Luther publicly objected to this practice, which he decried as dishonest and an abuse of church power.

On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his famous *95 Theses* to the University's bulletin board—the Castle Church door—formally challenging church leaders on the practice of selling indulgences and outlining the biblical doctrine of justification by grace alone. This act of nailing his *95 Theses* to the church door has become a defining moment in Christian history, symbolic of the birth of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther's vocal criticisms of the church were seen as a threat to papal authority,

and he was warned by the Cardinals of Rome to recant his position. Nevertheless, Luther refused to change his stand unless someone could point him to scriptural evidence for any other attitude.

Excommunication and Diet of Worms

In January of 1521, Luther was officially excommunicated by the Pope. Two months later, he was ordered to appear before Emperor Charles V in Worms, Germany, for a general assembly of the Holy Roman Empire, a convention known as the "Diet of Worms" (pronounced "dee-it of Vorms"). On trial before the highest Roman officials of the Church and State, again Martin Luther was asked to renounce his views. Just as before, with no one able to provide irrefutable scriptural evidence, Luther stood his ground. As a result, Martin Luther was issued the Edict of Worms, banning his writings and declaring him a "convicted heretic." Luther escaped in a planned "kidnapping" to Wartburg Castle, where he was kept protected by friends for almost a year.

Translation into German

During his seclusion, Luther translated the New Testament into the German language, giving lay people the opportunity to read God's Word for themselves and distribute Bibles among the German people for the first time. Although a bright spot in his spiritual quest, this was a dark time in Luther's emotional life. He is reported to have been deeply troubled by evil spirits and demons as he performed the translation. Perhaps this explains Luther's statement at the time that he had "driven the devil away with ink."

Great Accomplishments

Under the threat of arrest and death, Luther boldly returned to Wittenburg's Castle Church and began to preach there and in the surrounding areas. His message continued to be one of salvation by faith alone along with freedom from religious error and papal authority. Miraculously avoiding capture, Luther was able to organize Christian schools, write instructions for pastors and teachers (*Larger* and *Smaller Catechism*), compose hymns (including the well-known "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), put together numerous leaflets, and even publish a hymnbook during this time.

Married Life

Shocking both friends and supporters, Luther was married on June 13, 1525 to Katherine von Bora, a nun who had abandoned the convent and taken refuge in Wittenburg. Together they had three boys and three girls and led a happily married life in the Augustinian monastery.

Aging but Active

As Luther aged, he suffered from many illnesses including arthritis, heart problems, and digestive disorders. However, he never quit lecturing at the University, writing against abuses of the Church, and fighting for religious reforms.

In 1530, the famous *Augsburg Confession* (the primary confession of faith of the Lutheran Church) was published, which Luther helped to write. And in 1534 he completed translation of the Old Testament in German. His theological writings are considerably extensive. Some of his later works contained violent writings with crude and offensive language, creating enemies amongst his fellow reformers, Jews, and of course, Popes and leaders in the Catholic Church.

Final Days

During an exhausting trip to his hometown of Eisleben, on a mission of reconciliation to settle an inheritance dispute between the princes of Mansfeld, Luther succumbed to death on February 18, 1546. Two of his sons and three close friends were at his side. His body was taken back to Wittenburg for his funeral and burial at Castle Church. His grave is located directly in front of the pulpit where he preached, and it can still be seen today.

More than any other church reformer in Christian history, the impact and influence of Luther's contributions are hard to adequately describe. His legacy, though highly controversial, has marched on through a parade of equally zealous reformers who modeled Luther's passion for letting God's Word be known and understood personally by every man. It's no exaggeration to say that almost every branch of modern Protestant Christianity owes some portion of its spiritual heritage to Martin Luther, a man of radical faith.

Sources:

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Original Link: https://www.learnreligions.com/martin-luther-biography-700828